

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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December 17, 2017

Third Sunday of Advent: John 1: 6-8, 19-28

On a cold day in the middle of December five years ago, I was traveling to Des Moines, Iowa with four of my seminary classmates to serve in our good friend's deacon ordination. Because two and a half years of full-time graduate school had left us all drained financially, we ended up taking a very early and fairly indirect route to save money by flying from Austin, Texas, to Kansas City, Missouri, and then driving a rental car north to Des Moines. Somewhere between Kansas City and the Iowa state line, we stopped at a truck stop for coffee. As we wandered around browsing the Jesus figurines and religious wall plaques for sale, looking for a suitable tacky ordination gift, we noticed that the wall-mounted TV's were all tuned to a breaking news broadcast and that something big and horrible was happening.

Joining the small crowd watching the broadcast, we learned that just an hour before a young man had entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, fatally shooting twenty children and six staff members before killing himself. Earlier that morning, he had also shot and killed his mother. The world suddenly seemed a much uglier and more frightening place. Watching all those terrified children being led out of the school following the massacre, I thought of my own then elementary-aged child. Like many, I wondered, how could this happen? Where is God in this? Who can see the light in the midst this darkness? Who dares to testify to it?

In our Old Testament reading today, the prophet Isaiah declares:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Such beautiful words; so rich and full of hope and promise. With these words, Isaiah speaks to the devastated and exiled people of Israel and proclaims salvation, restoration, and mission. In the midst of this darkness, he reminds them of who they are and who God is.

In not so many words, he tells those who weep and yearn for Zion that they are favored by God; that God will raise them from their devastations and exchange comfort and gladness for mourning; that God promises liberty, release, healing, and good news for the captive, imprisoned, brokenhearted, and oppressed. Isaiah reminds them that their God is a sovereign Lord who is compassionate, loves justice, and is faithful to his people. Isaiah speaks of justice, hope, anticipation, and deliverance to a ruined people as a reminder that God has not forgotten them.

The people of ancient Israel must have asked themselves: how can this be? Where is God in our mourning and exile? Then, as now, we look around and see corruption, oppression, suffering, and destruction. And yet, behind all this, the prophet can also see God's presence and salvific work in the world. The eyes of the prophet are able to see redemption and transformation already happening in, through, and in spite of our sin and suffering.

Prophets – you almost have to be a little bit crazy to be a prophet. Prophets are people who are able to see things as they really are. The eyes of the prophet see the world not as we would wish for it to be – nor as we fear it might be – but as it really is: a world threaded through with both fear and love, sin and grace, corruption and redemption, death and life. The eyes of the prophet are able to see all of this and hold both of these perspectives together, witnessing the light amid the darkness and perceiving a whole that is so much greater than the parts.

It seems that it takes a prophet to remind us who God is and the promises God has made to His beloved creation. Who else than those who may be just a little weird, a little unhinged, would be willing to stand up in the face of all things to the contrary, and boldly proclaim that the sovereign God of all loves what He has created and promises to continue to love us, even while inviting and encouraging us to live into this love.

Through the prophet, God tells his fearful people: “I am coming and I will make everything right. I will turn your tears into shouts of joy. I will fill the bellies of the hungry; liberate the captive; bind up the brokenhearted. I am coming and I will comfort those who mourn and give them the oil of gladness, and give to all a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. I will bring good news to the oppressed. I am coming.... And what is more, I am always coming. That is my everlasting covenant with you, my beloved.”

God promises restoration and His felt presence and salvation in the world. During Advent, we await expectantly, and a not a bit impatiently, for the nativity of the Christ child and his coming again at the end of time. But there is more than that. We are not just preparing and waiting for a future event, but also to be brought into the conscious awareness of the eternal presence of God within creation. Through the Jesus and the prophets, God promises that He is always coming and that, indeed, the Kingdom of Heaven is already here, if only we can trust and learn to put on the eyes of the prophet.

Who else but prophets can pronounce this good news in the face of exile, of slavery, of the terrible abuse and dehumanization that we both inflict and endure? This message is preposterous to those who can't see beyond this veil of tears to the eternal truth that our God is the God who was, and is, and is to come. To the ancients and to us as well, it seems as though this God of whom the prophets speak has been defeated by the stronger gods of the times: violence, hunger, persecution, and economic and social marginalization.

Who else but a prophet like Isaiah can stand up amid the Babylonian destruction and exile and boldly proclaim, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” Who else but a prophet such as John, who baptizes repentant Jews under the oppressive thumb of the Roman Empire, is fearless enough to pronounce that the Messiah is, in fact, coming – that God has not forsaken His people and that the true King will reign.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this prophet John is known as John the Baptist, the Baptizer, the son of Zechariah. But in John's gospel, he is merely described as John, the one sent by God to witness and testify to the coming Light, the Word made flesh. John is the prophet sent from God to see and recognize this true Light of God and to call attention to it so that others may recognize this Light and be renewed and transformed by the eternal love of God.

Who else but prophets have the courage, vision, and pure hutzpah to do this? But that is precisely what the faithful people of God are commissioned to do. *We* are to be prophets who proclaim the year of the Lord's favor to a broken, lonely, and hurting world. *We* are to be the courageous, and possibly a bit crazy, prophets who make this bold declaration about the character of God to a demoralized people, reminding us all that our God is a God of love who has made an everlasting covenant with his beloved people.

As Isaiah and John were the holy humans sent by God to remind us of God's love and bear witness the coming Light. *We* are now the holy ones who must proclaim this eternally coming, renewing, and restoring Light that is manifested within creation as the Christ. *We* must be the ones to *put on the eyes of the prophet* and witness the light and testify to its presence and work within world, renewing creation and redeeming the darkness.

Amen.